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Island Gets Breathing Room On Its Statistical Status

By John Rather

In what appears to be a measured retreat, the federal Office of Budget and Management has reopened the comment period for a change in the statistical status of Long Island.

The move follows complaints from local officials and members of the Long Island congressional delegation that the revised status could cost millions in government aid and erase the region's separate identity.

The budget office said it would continue to treat Long Island as if it were a Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, its longstanding designation, until at least Sept. 30, when the comment period ends.

The new classification, which the budget office announced in June as part of a national reconfiguring, made Long Island the Suffolk-Nassau Metropolitan Division, one of four metropolitan divisions in a 23-county New York Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Long Island officials said the change hurt Long Island because statistics for Nassau and Suffolk would be more difficult to access and because of the way some government agencies compute aid for certain programs, including community block grants.

"We were able to get them to reopen this whole process, which is unusual," said Representative Steve Israel, a Democrat of Huntington. "Now we're in extra innings and we just need to make sure we win."

In a letter to Mr. Israel dated June 26, the budget office's acting director, Augustine T. Smythe, said that statistical information would continue to be available for the Suffolk-Nassau Metropolitan Division, but described the old Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area as obsolete.

Lee E. Koppelman, the executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board, said Mr. Smythe's qualified assurances left room for doubt.

"The bottom line is that we want the same array and detail of data that we got in the 1990 census," he said. "I don't care what they call us, but I do care if there is any diminution."

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